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Afghan Women: From Sub-zero of Terrorism and Taliban to Today
By Nasrine Gross
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Below I would like to describe the situation of Afghan women today. They were outlawed non-citizens during the reign of the Taliban militias and their terrorist masters. After the September 11 tragedy, the International Coalition began Operation Enduring Freedom. November 13, 2001, Kabul was liberated - so were Afghan women. December 22, 2001, a broad-based six-month interim government started operating under the rules of the 1964 Constitution, very good news for Afghan women. June 2002, an emergency loya jirga elected a transitional government for two years, to rebuild the administrative infrastructure, begin the reconstruction effort, draw up a new constitution, convene a loya jirga to ratify the constitution, and hold national elections to transition to a permanent state and legitimate mode of governance. Here, I would like to describe the activities of the government vis-a-vis women, discuss the implications of the new constitution and the Declaration of the Essential Rights of Afghan Women, and point out some of the challenges.

I. The Government

A. The Makeup of the Transitional Government (U: Uzbek, P: Pashtun, H: Hazara, S: Shia, T: Tajik):

President, Hamed Karzai - P, and four vice-presidents (Fahim - T, Khalili - H/S, Amin-Arsala - P and Shahrani - U).
Twenty-nine cabinet ministries: Foreign Affairs, Abdullah - P, Interior, Jalali - P, Defense, Fahim - T, Transportation, Jawid - H/S, Aviation, Sadeq - T, Mines, Mohammadi - T, Light Industries, Razm - U, Water and Electricity, Kargar - U, Agriculture, Anwari - H/S, Water and Irrigation, Nouristani - Nouristani, Public Works, Ali - T, Urban Development, Pashtun - P, Finance, Ghani - P, Refugees, Nazari - T, Crippled and Martyrs, Wardak - P, Pilgrimage and Religious Information, Nasseryar - ?, Women's Affairs, Sorabi - H/S, Communications, Stanikzai - P, Rural Development, Atmar - P, Planning, Mohaqeq - H/S, Reconstruction, Farhang - T, Information and Culture, Raheen - T, Commerce, Kazemi - S, Higher Education, Fayez - T, Education, Qanooni - T, Public Health, Siddiq - P, Frontiers, Noorzai - P, Justice, Karimi - U, Work and Social Affairs, Qarqin - Turkman/U?.

In addition, there are about 20 minister-councilors or ministers of state and three commissions of Constitutional Drafting Commission headed by Shahrani - U, Human Rights headed by Sima Samar - H/S, and Judicial

Commission headed by Baha - T/P?. As well there are the Supreme Court headed by Mawlawi Shinwari - P, the Central Bank headed by Ahadi - P and the Red Crescent headed by Izidyar - T.

B. The Government Offices and Women:

Currently, the women in positions of power are the following: 1) Three ministers: Habiba Sorabi - H/S, Minister for Women's Affairs, General Suhaila Siddiq - P, Minister of Public Health, and Prof. Mahbuba Huquqmal - P, Minister of State for Women's Issues.

2) Four deputy ministers: Tajwar Kakar - P and Soraya Subhrang - T, ministry of Women's Affairs, Qamar Wakili - P, ministry of Works and Social Affairs, Soraya Danish Zaringar - T/P?, ministry of Information and Culture.

3) Five women generals including General Khatol Mohamadzai - P at the ministry of Defense, and two generals at the ministry of the Interior.

4) At least a dozen women as division chiefs in various ministries including Zainab Anwari - H/S, Safia Siddiqui - P, Najia Zohal Zara - T, Makay Shah - T/P?, and others.

5) Two women out of nine commissioners in the Constitutional Drafting Commission. Mrs. Assefa Kakar - P and Judge Mukkarrama Akrami - T. Women judges in the Judicial Commission including Judge Hamida - P/T?. And Sima Samar - H/S, Amena Afzali - T, Suraya Ahmadyar - P/T, Homaira Nemati - U and Hangama Anwari - P/T? in the Human Rights Commission.

Each ministry and agency has tried to have on the premises a free day care center for the employees' children and free transportation to and from work. As well each agency has tried to have its own council of women to attend to the particular needs of women in that work environment. Many of these councils are looking for funding to establish literacy, English, computer and rights courses. Each ministry is trying to be diligent about abuse and sexual harassment. (I know of two cases, one a manager sexually harassing a female subordinate was immediately fired; and the other, a principal abusing a young child was also fired and all other principals given in-depth directions.)

C. The Number of Women in the Government:

Although women are not yet present at pre-Taliban levels, each ministry still follows the traditional pattern in Afghanistan. Some ministries have the most number of female employees, such as education, public health, higher education, communication and agriculture. Below are some statistics and salient points about some of the agencies. These numbers are mostly rough estimates but do show the direction of the government in the past year.

1) Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 320 total employees inside Afghanistan,

40 of them women. It also has established 47 missions outside of Afghanistan and helped set up about 60 foreign missions inside. It hosted the conference that resulted in the Kabul Declaration of Friendly Neighbor Policy, and later, the US-Afghan Women's Council headed by Paula Dobriansky, the US Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs. It has just announced a position for international women's affairs.

2) Ministry of the Interior: About 75,000 employees nation-wide and about 1,800 women employees. The ministry's council of women was partly instrumental in getting Karzai to issue a regulation that the female employees must follow a dress code appropriate to their job, such as policewomen cannot be hindered by scarves and need to wear their uniforms and caps while on duty.

3) Ministry of Planning: About 300 employees of which about 100 are women.

4) Ministry of Aviation about 3,000 employees of which about 30% are women. This agency was a leader in the women's movement in the late 1950's. It is still so by providing stewardesses to the Ariana Airlines. It also airlifted 26,000 pilgrims this year to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj. It had to fly about 1,200 of them per day. Organizing them was a job well-done considering these pilgrims come from all over Afghanistan, many do not read or write, don't have a telephone in their district, roads are impassable and most have never left their own environment, let alone go to a foreign country by plane. (The ministry wants to send Afghan girls abroad to study to be pilots. Anyone interested to offer such a program, contact the ministry.)

5) Ministry of Light Industries: There are 7,779 employees all over Afghanistan of which 1,283 are women, including engineers. They have about 27 factories around Afghanistan.

6) Ministry of Information and Culture: Total number of employees is about 2,560 of which 442 are women, including division chiefs, TV and radio announcers and theater and film actresses. This ministry's attention to both different religious philosophies and sects as well as Afghan cultural heritage have helped to point out the diversity of the Afghan people and the pluralistic nature of society.

7) Ministry of Public Works: There are about 1,500 employees and 350 are women, including civil engineers and forewomen. Once the reconstruction projects get really underway, this ministry should see a sharp increase in women employees.

8) Ministry of Refugee Repatriation: There are about 1,300 employees in all of Afghanistan and about 250 women, including division chiefs. In the first year, this ministry has processed 1,800,000 returnees and 500,000 internal refugees. The ministry maintains that unless reconstruction begins at the returnees' localities, the repatriation will not be successful.

9) Ministry of Higher Education: There are about 260 employees including 60 women. The combined number of professors in all the ministry's institutions is 1,430 male and 239 women. There are also 26,000 students, 5,000 are female. I know from first hand experience that this is one of the most successful ministries. There were no women students/teachers/employees last year. Now officially-recognized universities around the country catering to local constituencies and national needs are University of Kabul, Education University (also in Kabul), Kandahar, Nangarhar, Khost, Bamyian, Takhar, Gulbahar and Balkh Universities.

10) Ministry of Urban Development: Of about 369 employees, 83 are women, including civil engineers and planners. This ministry has a very difficult task of urban planning for a population that is essentially mostly rural and has moved to the cities. Kabul city alone was planned for a population of maybe 800,000, now has 2.5 million and is estimated to grow to 6 million in just a few years.

11) Ministry of Defense: The ministry has about 500 civilian employees of which 50 are women. This figure does not include the national armed forces which include five women generals and several air force pilots, nor the military hospitals where there are many women doctors several with the rank of general. Among the Mujaheddin there is a celebrated female commander by the name of Commander Kaftar. At present, the ministry has a three-pronged expensive and difficult challenge: Be prepared to defend Afghanistan, establish a national army of 70,000 in two years, and retire the Mujaheddin in an honorable and satisfactory manner (reputed to number about 700,000).

12) Ministry of Women's Affairs: About 520 employees in Kabul of which 25% are male. Needless to say, the ministry does mot have a council of women employees. Paula Dobriansky's visit with its 2.5 million dollars for 14 provincial centers was a very welcome boost. In as much as the visit was dazzling in its makeup of very important and appropriate people, it was also very reassuring about the United States desire to engage for the long haul in Afghanistan AND the United States emphasis on human/women's rights in the new constitution.

13) Ministry of Agriculture: About 11,500 employees, about 107 female administrative, and 170 female specialists in Kabul. The ministry would like to see the number of its female staff go up to its once very high number that included agronomists, veterinarians, soil chemists, extension agents, and plant protection, forestry and green house experts. Given the realities of Afghanistan, this is one of the areas where most attention should be concentrated.

14) Ministry of Reconstruction: There are about 320 employees including about 80 women.

15) Ministry of Education: By far the largest employer of women: It

has 4,576 employees including 939 women. The ministry also employs in the public schools 64,851 teachers, a large part being women (it has a shortfall of 28,615 teachers). Last year there were about 3 million students. This year they are expecting 4.5 million. Last year the US Agency for International Development (AID) printed 6.9 million textbooks for use in grades 1 - 6. For the coming scholastic year (March 22, 2003), AID plans to print 15 million textbooks for grades 1 - 12.

16) The Supreme Court: There are about 4,409 employees in 390 administrative/judicial offices around the country that include about 30% women. One of the good things that the Court did was to issue a resolution informing all Afghans that Jihad (holy war) in Afghanistan had ended and that anyone encouraging Afghans to Jihad was an enemy. Also, I am happy that they have brought attention to the porno films shown on cable. Since Afghans do not know foreign languages, they usually don't watch the newsy English or French or German channels. Instead, they turn on the porno films. I have been to homes where children, teenagers and grown ups all have access to these films. Aside from the fact that these films are not socially healthy, they also give the wrong impression about the West to the Afghans, most of whom have never left the country. >From conversations I have had, many Afghans now think that what goes on in the porno films is the West's values, traditions and daily life. I hope a compromise can be reached so that the cable can bring more educational material representative of the West's true values and civilization.

17) The Central Bank: They have many women employees, who were very instrumental during the transition from the old to the new bank notes.

18) The Red Crescent: They also have many women employees, especially in the Marastoon (the poor folks home) and its related nurseries and dormitories.

In addition to the government, there are now hundreds of civil society organizations and NGO's working inside Afghanistan. Most of these have at least a section dealing solely with women. However, the Afghan organizations are not paid much attention to by the non-Afghan organizations. Many non-Afghan NGO's would rather set up their own activities in Afghanistan than utilize the knowledge and experience of the Afghan organizations. Still, all these organizations are reaching to thousands of Afghans both in the urban centers as well as the countryside.

II. The New Constitution

Preparing a constitution is the most important task facing the government as it defines afresh a common vision of the new Afghanistan as an independent, legitimate and self ruling state responsible for a unique Afghan nation within the community of nations. It is being drafted by a nine member Constitutional Drafting Commission. The draft is due out by first week of March. The Commission intends to publicize

the draft and ask for comments by interested citizens. There is also a Revision/Advisory Commission being formed to review the draft and the comments. The revised draft will be presented in October to a loya jirga for ratification.

The nine members of the Commission are: Prof. Shahrani - U, Dr. Sherzoy - P, Dr. Fazelly - S, Kakar - P, Akrami - T, Prof. Azimi - P, Danesh - H, Ashary - T/S?, Dr. Maroofi - P. All are university graduates and several have Ph.D's. Several have studied Shariat (Islamic jurisprudence). Several have told me that members were required to read all past constitutions of Afghanistan as well as quite a number from other countries most pertinent to the Afghan situation. The Commission has also consulted with several prominent constitutional and Afghan scholars from other countries.

Through this new constitution Afghan women must be considered as equal citizens to Afghan men. They were considered as such nearly forty years ago as well as in the currently operational constitution. They are no less citizens today. Those who say the traditions, culture and religion of Afghanistan are against the rights of women (same argument that the Taliban used) should look at what an earlier Afghanistan wanted and achieved four decades ago. Now that the people of Afghanistan have gone through two decades of brutal victimization, they want more than ever to have a democratic constitution. I am certain of this. The last 18 months I have had the pleasure of meeting about 40,000 Afghans (including about 10,000 women) from all over Afghanistan. Only a handful were against; the rest all want to have equality of citizenship for men and women so that the state will have the same responsibilities to male as to female citizens and the atrocities of the last few years will never be repeated - - they know full well that whipping Afghan women on the street has NEVER been a tradition or religion of Afghanistan.

The argument that women's rights will be fixed through the civil code after the constitution is ratified is dangerous. If we do not have our inalienable rights in the constitution, there is no way we can make headway in the civil code. The argument is intended to delay the well-being of Afghanistan and our success by at least another two generations. Just look at the experience of other countries in this regard.

Also, the argument that rights must come in a gradual manner is for those who want to keep Afghanistan a damaged state. Human dignity is not gradual; neither should those rights emanating from this dignity. Although implementing these rights will be gradual; in fact, failing to recognize all of them in the constitution will result in an oppressive regime. We should not be protecting our enemies' ideological gains in this manner. Now - - when an International Coalition is fighting these terrorists inside Afghanistan - - is the best time to have vision and ensure our inalienable rights in the constitution.

Finally, the argument that Afghanistan must follow some other country's model is a put down of Afghanistan. Yes, Afghanistan should learn lessons from the experience of other countries. But, why not follow its own Afghan model of being a Muslim and a democratic country? The articles pertaining to citizens' rights in the 1964 Constitution (Chapter 3, Articles 25 to 40) are democratic, and, they are based on Afghan values and ideals of Islam. Note that it has been in effect for the last year without complaints from the citizenry.

III. The Declaration of the Essential Rights of Afghan Women

A: The Support Signatures:

Here are some of the names in the Afghan government who have thus far signed the Declaration: Karzai, Khalili, Abdullah, Sadeq, Razm, Kargar, Ali, Pashtun, Ghani, Nazari, Mohaqeq, Farhang, Raheen, Kazemi, Fayez, Qanooni, Noorzai, Rassoul, Baha, Mawlawi Shinwari, Manawi, Sherzoy, Fazelly, Payman, Mobarez, Kakar, Mohamadzai, Zara, Samar, Kamawi, Panjshiri, Barialay, Dostum, Taniwal, Ustad Atta, Commander Daud and others. As well Governors of Ghazni, Kunduz, Parwan, Kunar and others. Also, many of the ministries' council of women and many principals of schools. Some names in the power establishment include Rabbani, Mawlawi Takhari, Alizoy, Mir of Gazargah, Poya, Nasraty, Abed, Wali Massoud, Said Bibi Naqi, Elahi, Barekzoy, Said Anarshah, Joya, Haji Abdulwahed, Haji Zarif, Amena Afzali, Zarghuna Qanooni, Mari Nabardayeen, Hashemi, Zakera, and others. Some of those who are no longer with us: Ahmad Shah Massoud, Haji Qadir, Roqia Habib, Abdurrahman, Razawi, and others. Some institutional signatures: Council of Peace and Progress, Women's High Institute, Tamkeen Clinic, Council of National Unity of Ethnic Groups, Center for Unity and Cultural Development, National Union of Sportspeople, High Council of Freed Political Prisoners, Council of Peace of Sadat, National Union of Government Employees, Council of Voluntary Organizations, Council of Women of Afghanistan, Lawyers Association, Afghan Students Association, Federation of Protecting the Young Returnees' Rights, Protection of Human Rights and Development of Afghanistan, Council of Elders of Ghor, Council of Elders of Urgun, and many many others.

Plus thousands of Afghans from all the provinces of Afghanistan, non-literates, internal refugee communities, farmers, widows, fighters, clerics, intellectuals, urban elites, tradespeople, civil society organizations, journalists, writers, Shia associations, ethnic group representatives, students and others have now signed the Statement of Support for the Declaration. We have also been invited to most of the provinces and due to lack of resources have not yet been able to make the trip to all of them. We have a sizable number of signatures also from Afghans living abroad.

Of course, there are now hundreds of thousands of people around the world who have signed including many representatives, cabinet ministers, clergy and others. (Make sure you have signed by sending me an email

with your full name and address).

B: The Immediate Plans:

Negar-Support of Women of Afghanistan, the Paris-based Afghan women's organization will present a copy of the signatures to the United Nations in New York on the International Women's Day. Shoukria Haidar, President of Negar and a group of women from around the world will meet with appropriate offices at the UN. We also plan to present a copy to the Constitutional Drafting Commission in Kabul.

VI. The Challenge

The challenge however is formidable. The fragility of the Afghan government, the fragility of our success against the extremist enemies, the vulnerability of this war-ravaged people, all demand unfaltering and unmistakable action to rid the world of terrorism and extremism and to restore durable peace to Afghanistan.

A. The 90% vs the 10%

The good news in the women's front is however mostly for the 10% of Afghan women who are literate and educated and live in the urban centers. The other 90% of women (about perhaps eight million) are non-literate and/or live in the rural and provincial districts. In many of these districts most of the men are also non-literate; many areas are unreachable; many are extremely backward. I keep wondering how much the life of the 90% has changed. How much is possible? It is true that for most of them peace has come in some ways; many of their children can now go to school; their husbands, sons, fathers, brothers are no longer away to do battle. They don't have to spend days wondering where their menfolk might be, or preparing food for their fighters' war journeys, or fending for the children and their safety all by themselves. However, I find these women the silent majority. Their voice is not heard; they are not used to raising it. And neither they nor their men speak the language of rights. What is worse, not only they are the poorest segment of this impoverished nation, but they are also the butt of propaganda against women's rights. They are the ones on whom propaganda's fear and confusion machine operates most successfully (just listen to so many Afghan women citing fear as the reason for not removing their chadaris). Sociopolitical divisions of the other 10% further fuels this vulnerability. How can we reach this 90%? How can we convince them that citizens' rights is about them and their daily life? How can we neutralize all this savvy propaganda? How can we satisfy them that a democratic Afghanistan is not a threat to their cherished identity, to their beautiful faith, to their proud and ancient way of life?

B. External Enemies

The most serious threat to the establishment of a full democratic regime

in Afghanistan, however, is the interference of enemies. I have mentioned this in my previous writings but the longer I live in Afghanistan the more convinced I become of its validity. There are countries which do not have full women's rights in their own societies, there are countries which oppose a fully independent, relegitimized, and self-ruling Afghanistan, and there are the extremist groups which do not want to see all their gains in Afghanistan come to naught. For them women's rights is the pawn in an international chess game. And they stop at nothing to damage the democratic process by the easiest route possible, namely denying women's full rights as citizens. Along with their stepped up military activity, these groups are currently working very hard inside Afghanistan to not only create fear and confusion among Afghans about women's rights but also to engineer a couple of articles in the constitution limiting the rights of female citizens. They are also hard at work outside to convince the world that it is really Afghanistan itself that is intolerant and against women's rights. The interests of these enemies in this constitution are a powerful force against democracy and freedom.

V. Conclusion

The realization of women's rights as full citizens is one of the most effective ways to deal a permanent blow to international terrorism and extremist ideology. It is time for all governments of the world to insist that in this new Afghan constitution women's rights as full citizens are non-negotiable. We must defeat global terrorism at its ideological core and this is the best opportunity for it.

This constitution will be the global standard for women's rights as citizens - - for better or for worse. It is also a litmus test of global power of women since it was primarily the women of the world who opposed the Taliban and deterred governments from granting the militia recognition. It is time to show that we really meant it.

Make no mistake about it. In this first constitution of the twenty-first century, this is the moral imperative of democracy - - full citizen's rights for Afghan women. And from where I am sitting in the ruins of my birthplace, the city of Kabul, I fully believe that standing together we can achieve victory.

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